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IN A MONASTERY

BY LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX

PLACE: The Certosa di Pavia

TIME: 1517

HERE in this quiet corner of the earth
I sit, wrapped round in peace and brooding thought;
Daily ere sunset tips our glistening spires
I walk along the cloister flags and count
The slender shafts of rose and white, whereon
Our four-and-twenty cells look out; the sky
Is caught and framed in each three-pointed arch,
And from each niche a stalwart saint looks up.

I sought this place myself; safety I sought
From a tumultuous life; no Joseph, I,
And yet my master's wife plucked at my robe.
'Tis like the tale I oft see wrought in stone
High up upon the great Cathedral walls.
I cannot strive; I only cared for peace
And prayer and meditation and still days.
The hours are dull and I forget to think
The saintly meditations, I had planned,
And fancied that they nested in these walls.
Alas! I was unknowing; the bell that tolls
To prayer breaks in on sad and sullen thought
In which I ask, and ask, and ask again,
"Why am I here?" Then beat such promptings off
With paternosters many times retold.
But best I like to stand there in the cell
Where Mary, painted by Luini, sits,
So patient resting with her child and book,
And gazes, slantwise smiling at the Christ.
She knows the weary watch for looming fate.

“ Nine months,” her weary smile says, “ aye, nine months
I bore the intolerable thought of some event
In which the angels took a part; and all my dreams
Were awed by strangeness, till my little babe,
All human, came to draw me back to earth.
Then following through the quiet days I learned
How little of our life we know to live.
And so I followed Him; from the warm straw
On which He smiling lay, a tiny babe
With curls and pink-soled feet, like other babes,
Until I heard Him on His cross forgive
Mankind; and then I saw Him smile at them;
He smiled and said, ‘ They know not what they do.’
And hearing this I knew Him for my God.
I saw a far, far off horizon light,
And knew that different, better days would come
And different men; till then we bear and wait.”
So says Luini’s Virgin on the wall.
Sebastian and Christopher, His saints,
Say just the same, “ We do not know our fate.”
And so with bowing heads and waving hands
They face the still hours with their mystic smiles.
Saint Christopher, the one who smiles so still,
F’orded the stream by night and bore the Child
Through waves tumultuous that rose and curved,
Mountainous crests that broke above his head;
And all the while, the Babe, light-girdled, sat
Upon his shoulders, two small fingers raised,
To bless; yet heavier and heavier bore him down.
I have no burden, God, not even a grief;
Only long days that cut me off from joy.
Sometimes when slow the sun turns red and droops,
One sanguinary ray will pierce my cell
And fall upon this vellum page I write;
I look and then I have my mood of joy,
Elation for the thing that I have wrought
In slow, sad hours; the careful curves and lines,
Long scrolls and delicate gay tendril work.
O God, just this! And all the rest is thirst
And hunger and the body’s needs! That leap
Of heart I do despise, with which I hear
The bell that tolls me in to eat; I am
No glutton like Tomaso there; ’tis not

The love of food and drink and less the love
Of jest and laughter. Rather 'tis I joy
To break the sad, slow time in which I stare
At these white walls and wonder how it is
E'en beauty wanes. Sometimes across my thought
A long-lost memory wakes me to my past;—
My mother as she kissed me in my bed—
That neighbor's child I took a-nutting,
How she laughed! I hear it through the dark
When wide awake I toss and think at night.
She may be dead by now; out in the world
I might have wept above her bier and felt
Real grief to know her laughter stilled forever.
Once ere my life was shut in these close walls
I traveled on a mission with a priest.
He taught the people all along the way.
He preached and gave them images of saints,
Which they confounded with their ancient gods
And prayed to in a blind, profane, dull way.
And then they grieved that neither saints nor gods
Stretched down their hands from heaven's blue to save
Us from our deeds and follies and mistakes.
Yet while we went, we came to that sweet point
That juts into a sapphire lake; there once
A Roman singer, fighter, built his home.
So bold the strip of land stands, feet in sea,
Backed by the silvery olive-groves, with stems
Wherethrough the sun peeps, making broken shade
Over the dry, brown grass. Out at the end
The storied arches rise; all that is left
Of grandeur past there at Sirmione,
Built some one thousand years ago. And there
The arches curve for God's own works,
To sapphire lakes and mountain peaks and towns,
That huddle in the hollows of the land,
And dabble in the shallows of the sea.
I thought to be a singer too and priest.
Not less but more than he who built his house
On beauty of the land and sea, because
I built my thoughts on God. Alas! Alas!
I did not know how bleak the night through which
One treads to God and to His starry heights.
What deeds are here to fill these empty hours?

The memory lives; I can recall at will
The moment and the light, the soft, low swish
Of waters that recede. And oft at dawn
Some slant red ray that falls across my bed
Awakes the dream. But most I live my life
Just at the moment's instance. Crave my food
And hate my brother's face and nasal whine;
Or ache until my very soul is sick
To 'scape these walls grown hideous by sameness.
Sometimes I watch aerial squadrons spread
In shifting patterns on the autumn sky,
And all my heart grows sick to fly like birds
To other scenes and other thoughts and lives.
The pang is like to burst my breast. I turn
Back to the golden page I make to save
My soul. For who can say but that long hence
Some traveler from some unknown shore may bend
Above my pages, gold and brown, deep blue
With silver letters, each a picture drawn,
For its own beauty; see my margin broad
With angels, harps, and saints set there for joy.
And, too, that he may know that traveler,
Coming from din and traffic of much life,
How here in silence and the dark I yearned
For life and width and brightness, I have set
In small medallions by the letters large
Soft Lombard scenes; gray waters, willows bent
By wandering winds. And even once I drew
A castellated tower with ladies fair
Who sat and watched while knights came riding by.
I've heard a sailor once from Genovà
Braved all the dangers of the unknown seas
To find new lands. He found them barbarous,
Waste, bare, and savage. Nay, I would not spend
A life in braving dangers wild, and go
Sailing the monstrous seas that swallow lives
In sheer wild lust of cruelty and death.
But if I had a life to give, I'd tread
The flowered earth and see all lovely towns
Our painters set behind the Blessed Child,
Those backgrounds to immortal motherhood.
I'd climb the dim, blue hills that all are crowned
With towers white and battlements. I'd find

Inlets of soft, smooth sea and winding roads
Down which great kings with all their motley troops
Come riding in high state and pageantry.
I'd watch the broidered garment of the Spring
Shaken out loose across the land and sea,
The fringed trees take on new pride, and earth
Grow green and glad beneath the brightening sun.
I'd travel far to see the homes that man
Has reared to make his earth look safe and gay.
I'd toy o'er courtly words in splendid halls
With ladies in stiff brocade gowns that shine
As do our abbot's jewels 'neath the light
O' th' altar on fête-days. It cannot be!
Yet I have had my hours and have them still.
Here at this desk where lies my parchment scroll
On which I limn gold lines and arabesques,
And soft medallioned pictures to make fair
The text—the westering sun sends rays of gold
That fall between the window-bars athwart
My book and light it up until the page
Of letters seems alive and I can think
The work I've wrought in still, sad musing hours
Shall yet outstrip me; live when I am dead,
And speak to other men of all this mystery,
This secret of the immortal life of art.
Who draws a perfect scroll or limns a page
Leaves treasure here for other men and speaks
Beyond his day; controls his fate and reaps
Reward for empty hours and starved desires.
And so I set my heart on him who'll come
From far, long hence to see my page and stoop
And say: "Would God I'd made a page like that!"
And so for this I throw my life and soul
Into the balance to be weighed and tried
With this the work I've done. God! I have wrought
Some beauty in my day! It is enough!

LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.